



Crossing the line

Outlined by surrounding hills, blue skies stretch over a wide strip of Maasai land in the early evening breeze. Ogeli Ole Makui, a Masaai pastoralist, points to a thin line stitched into the sweeping plains. "If you look down southwards, that is the great north road. If you go along the tarmac road, you would be shocked by the intensity of fences there," he says. Fences crisscross the landscape, carving it into smaller and smaller individual plots of land. These barriers also block the migratory path of wildlife and livestock, cutting off access to vital resource such as water. In fact, fences stand in the way of what underpins Maasai culture: community land and pastoral movement.



Kitengela, Kenya

The fences also contribute to the growing problem of desertification, soil erosion and land degradation in the land around Kitengela near Nairobi. The Maasai raise large herds of cattle, though this is not a problem for nomadic pastoral communities who move seasonally to other pastures when resources in one area are low. Because land is no longer communal, livestock tend to over-graze one particular piece of pasture. "The intensity of grazing increases, so soil erosion definitely becomes an issue here and desertification is encouraged," says Makui. As the great north road brings good opportunities for development: good infrastructure, telephone lines and electricity, it also attracts land buyers - and fences.

Land fragmentation is a problem with some history. During the 1990s, an expanding population led to sprawling settlements outside the city of Nairobi. Well connected areas like Kitengela are still in high demand, and many of the Masaai people attracted by high land prices sold their land. Communal group ranches in the Kitengela area were subdivided into increasingly fragmented plots of land. Land use changed from grazing wildlife and livestock, to growing industries such as flower farms contributing to the depletion of water resources. In effect, the Masaai people sold their wealth to buy poverty.

Wildlife conservation

Kitengela is immediately south of Nairobi National Park, and lies in the Athi-Kaputiei corridor - an ecosystem rich in bio-diversity, with active migratory wildlife movement, especially zebra and wildebeest. Tourism is the nation's top earner of foreign exchange, and with wildlife as the main attraction, protecting wildlife and natural diversity is an economic priority. Although pastoral communities traditionally have played a role in maintaining the diversity of wildlife in the Athi-Kaputiei corridor, its existence is increasingly threatened by changes in land tenure and, over the past 25 years, there has been a 70 per cent loss of wildlife in Nairobi National Park and the associated ecosystem. The Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme, led by the Wildlife Foundation, and Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) aims to re-create communal land areas and to allow free movement of wildlife, as well as livestock. The programme works by



paying pastoral landowners approximately US\$ 4 per acre every year, to keep their land open and unfenced. Families who join the scheme must agree not to develop, sell or fence their land - if their land is already fenced they must first take them down.

Fewer fences means progress

Starting with just two landowners, the programme has steadily expanded to 8,500 acres belonging to 117 families. Other community members are now interested in joining the programme, potentially contributing a further 17,000 additional acres. According to Makui, the community is settled, the Lease Programme allows

members to be "legally sedentary, but practically nomadic". Just outside Kitengela, in an area of vast Masai plains, with hardly a fence in sight, this is where the programme has really had impact. "I need my neighbour's grass, and he needs mine. We don't all have water on our land, and because of that coming together then we are able to utilise resources and minimise conflict," says Makui.

As the income from opening land contributes mainly to paying school fees, The Wildlife Foundation releases funds three times a year to coincide with school terms - and more women than men receive the money. The community has responded to the results of the project with enthusiasm. With the fences removed outside Kitengela, income has been boosted, and there is less pressure on land resources, allowing degraded land to recover.

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